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AUTHOR	Arrien, Juan B.
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ABSTRACT

In 1987, the department of Rio San Juan was declared the first "illiteracy-free territory" in Nicaragua, since it had reduced its rate of illiteracy from 96 percent in 1979 to 3.7 percent. This regional literacy crusade was made possible by the facts that the necessary facilities had been provided; a network of consultative committees established; really active and functioning technical teams had been formed in each zone; and the regional adult education teams had also been involved. The crusade also benefited from the participation of local organizations and from attention from the government. Main factors that contributed to the project's success included the following: (1) the literacy drive was conducted in the context of a broader socioeconomic transformation; (2) the community was mobilized; and (3) the teachers served as catalysts. As a result of this effort, Rio San Juan has gone from being a backward geographical area to being an area of development with a future of its own. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 140

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Nicaragua: mobilizing the local community for literacy and post-literacy

by Juán B. Arrien

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

THE FIRST NICARAGUAN 'ILLITERACY-FREE TERRITORY'

In 1987, the department of Rio San Juan was declared the first 'Illiteracy-Free Territory' in Nicaragua, since it had reduced its rate of illiteracy to 3.7% – from 96% in 1979.

Extracts from a report prepared by the Regional Delegation for Education on the occasion of the declaration of the Department of Rio San Juan as an Illiteracy-Free Territory (October 1987):

Rio San Juan, at the time of the Somoza dictatorship, was the most desolate province of Nicaragua, with an illiteracy rate of 96%, a situation which filled the hearts of all honest Nicaraguans with indignation. Today, thanks to the efforts and participation of farmers and agricultural workers – men and women who, after a day of toiling under sun and rain, arrived at the People's Education Teams to attend literacy classes or to teach their fellow men to read and write – the efforts and participation of all the school-teachers and team members of the Sandinista Youth, the district and regional technicians of the Ministry of Education, the leaders of mass organizations and the Sandinista National Liberation Front, Rio San Juan is now the most enlightened region of Nicaragua, with an illiteracy rate of 3.77% for persons over ten years of age, a situation which brings pride and pleasure to all the inhabitants of Rio San Juan and the entire country, and encourages them to continue their education and their participation in the work of the Revolution.

This regional literacy crusade was made possible by the facts that: the necessary facilities had been provided; a network of consultative committees established; really active and functioning technical teams had been formed in each zone; and the regional adult education teams had also been involved. The crusade benefited further from the participation of local organizations, the on-going presence of the Regional Committee of the Sandinista Front, and the fact that the entire people of Rio San Juan adopted this task as their own and

participated in it in one form or another. In other words, 'mobilization of the community' was a fundamental factor in the victory over illiteracy in this area.

Map: the regions of Nicaragua

In order to understand the community mobilization which occurred in Rio San Juan and to analyse the strategy and mechanisms which made it effective, it is necessary to take into account several basic facts concerning the area. Prior to the revolution, the province of Rio San Juan had the highest national concentration of land-ownership: 2.2% of the farms possessed 67.3% of the land, while 52% of the smaller properties amounted to only 5.7% of the land.

At the same time the illiteracy rate had attained 96%, and only forty-four teachers in the territory were working in the few primary schools, which were concentrated in the scattered urban communities.

The first steps towards eradication of illiteracy in the area were taken during the National Literacy Crusade (1980), when 1,348 teachers went into this vast, rugged territory with its sparsely dispersed population and brought literacy to 6,279 inhabitants of the area, reducing the illiteracy rate from 96% to 36.17%. Shortly thereafter, 115 Cuban teachers arrived to continue the education of those who had recently become literate. A new momentum to the literacy campaign was given in 1982 when the Province of Rio San Juan was converted into a special zone, with its own regional government and a regional delegation for education. The first step was the creation in 1983 of the 'Benicio Herrera Jerez' Brigade, composed initially of eighty-six young graduates from the country's different teacher training schools who volunteered to go to Rio San Juan at the end of their studies. In 1984, 115 new teachers joined the ranks of the brigade to conduct the 'Carlos Fonseca Amador' literacy operation (1985-87). The brigade then numbered 436 teachers, of whom 90% were women.

Literacy drive in the context of a broader socio-economic transformation

In 1986, one year before the department of Rio San Juan became an 'Illiteracy-Free Territory', it was declared the 'First Territory Free of Landless Farmers', for the large private estate sector now possessed only 7% of the farmland, as opposed to its former 87%.

It is not by coincidence that these two events are mentioned together. In fact, literacy only had significance within the broader process of economic and social change, and in a far-reaching process of educational reform. As a key element of this reform, literacy had no meaning unless its dissemination took place in educational conditions which provided a solid basis for the learning process, thus guaranteeing its effectiveness without the risk of relapse into illiteracy. It had to open new horizons, thereby arousing the interest of the literacy pupil and placing his social, economic and occupational existence in a situation conducive to genuine change.

In reality, every action in Rio San Juan in favour of change – agrarian reform, literacy, days devoted to the people's health or development projects – cannot be spoken about in isolation. The process of transformation was therefore a single, global process. It included important economic projects: introduction of African palm trees, root crop production, the rice project, cattle breeding, tree planting, expansion of land and river infrastructures, etc., as well as solid social projects such as the construction of a hospital and various health centres.

In harmony with these events, education progressed steadily. At present, there are in Rio San Juan fifteen

pre-school centres, forty-nine primary schools, two secondary schools, a teacher-training school, a school of administration and economics, a school of agriculture, an adult education centre (CEDA), and more than 400 teachers involved in education.

Mobilizing the community

This dynamic process of change and transformation generated an entire mobilization process. This implied first of all the massive involvement of the people, with ever broader and more determined participation.

Other complementary, but no less important activities, branched off from the people's participation: mobilization, creativity, training and – to lend greater coherence – organization.

> *The mobilization of the people, which in Rio San Juan was also identified with the mobilization of different social forces and of the community, is the dynamic expression of the people's participation. In the educative context this signifies 'placing and maintaining the people in a state of education', in a permanent state of turmoil, willing, prepared, active, alert and determined to undertake every important educational action.*

The catalyst role of the teachers

While it is true that it is not possible to instigate and accelerate profound social and educational change unless all the principal social forces of a territory are set into motion, nonetheless the protagonistic forces should always exist. In the case of Rio San Juan such a catalyst and permanent driving force was provided by the teachers making up the Benicio Herrera Jerez Brigade.

The teachers began to build schools, to learn and then to teach agricultural tasks and preventive health measures. They put together school and household furniture and organized the rural communities which

had been created to repulse the armed action of the counter-revolution. They participated in the implementation of the agrarian reform, while at the same time carrying out the literacy process: consolidating primary education (four grades); making use of multiple-grade teaching techniques; setting up the San Miguelito Regional Teacher Training School; creating and developing consultative councils, etc.

A precious input was provided by international groups from Austria, Cuba, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Basque country who, together with Nicaraguan teachers and the respective communities, built twenty schools, two dwellings for teachers and a library, and contributed adequate funding.

ZONA ESPECIAL III
RIO SAN JUAN

MUERTE A

LA IGNORANCIA

THE 'CARLOS FONSECA AMADOR' LITERACY OPERATION

The above-mentioned factors played a decisive role during this operation launched in 1985, with the objective of bringing literacy to the nearly 3,000 illiterates remaining in Rio San Juan, as a continuation of the national literacy campaign started shortly after the Revolution.

This operation was based on the following principles:

- *Every inhabitant of Rio San Juan who was able, had to learn to read and write.*
- *The eradication of illiteracy became a task of the people themselves, and relied on the solid involvement of the people and a massive mobilization of the community.*
- *The literacy campaign must follow a perfectly organized plan with a permanent follow-up mechanism.*
- *Literacy presupposes strengthening the basic education of children, and requires the opening of employment opportunities for adults by means of extensive development projects, the construction of schools in all communities and the training of local teachers to provide education.*

Naturally, the lines of action for applying these principles evolved during the course of the operation.

Previous page: A demonstration against illiteracy (Unesco/Ministry of Education, Nicaragua)

The major role in the organization of the process was carried out by the consultative councils which operated at three levels: territorial, zonal and regional. Each council, composed of seven to ten persons, brought together the representatives of rural mass organizations: farmers, teachers, students, institutions of the State and educational experts. They constituted a network of action functioning at many levels, with a specifically defined sphere of action and – as their fundamental characteristic – the maintenance of permanent contact with the global literacy process, motivating people or resolving the various problems which

arose. This network of consultative councils provided the impetus and acted as the guarantor of the overall literacy plan. So much so that the forty-five first-level (territorial) consultative councils, the three zonal councils and the regional council became the permanent catalysts of both the literacy and educative processes, as well as managing the education-related campaigns or responding to requests made by local communities (construction of dwellings, sending supplies, etc.)

Thus farmers were found who were members of the territorial consultative councils, whose role was to visit the People's Education Teams (CEP) every day, to chase up fellow workers who were absent on a particular day, or encourage them when they were already exhausted from a day's work. We also found women who, as members of the council, looked after the children of other women while the latter attended literacy sessions. Then there were agents who walked between fifteen and twenty kilometres per day to be present at the various CEP in an area, and to follow up methodically on the work of the literacy workers.

But perhaps most important was the fact that the zonal councils and the regional council were also mobile. This means that they were there when their presence was required. For example, when the Zone of San Miguelito detected problems which could make it difficult to reach the planned goal of eradicating illiteracy, the regional council moved to San Miguelito, installed its operations centre and concentrated its best technicians and teachers there. The goal was thus achieved.

For several months, Rio San Juan was canvassed, criss-crossed, invaded by teachers, agents, civil servants of the Ministry of Education and members of the government – all those involved in the educational campaign. Once there, the people entered the realm of education and education entered the realm of the people. The radio spoke about education, propaganda

emphasized education and administrative directives dealt with education. Thanks to this, people's education teams, functioning in schools, homes, farms and settlements, sprang up throughout the entire territory. Each community committed itself, through its representatives in the consultative councils, to the advancement of education. To this end, each community sought from within its midst the literacy workers it needed, assisted in the construction of schools, took part in the enrolment process so that no child remained on the fringe of education and took the necessary steps for those who failed to attend.

This is to say that the mobilization efforts encompassed all aspects inherent in the literacy process.

During this effort, a child of 13 years attended a CEP and went on to teach her mother to read and write. A child of 14 took over the education of five persons during the final offensive, which was to end in October 1987. A young man in a wheelchair taught reading and writing to forty people who came to his house every evening. These are only a few examples of the massive involvement among the local population during the literacy campaign.

The efforts were organized following the established priorities. In 1985 eight territories were given priority and in 1986, eleven, meaning that both the material resources and the brigade members, the best staff of the Ministry of Education, and the participation of the community were totally concentrated in these territories until the chosen objective was attained. Having achieved total success in seven of the eight territories chosen for 1986, the operation aroused further interest, empathy and subsequent involvement.

To sum up, it is pertinent to refer once again to the report of the Regional Delegation for Education on the occasion of declaring the Department of Rio San Juan the Illiteracy Free Territory: Rio San Juan is considered to be the First Illiteracy-Free Territory in Nicaragua not only because the illiteracy rate there has been reduced to 3.77% but also in light of:

- *the participation and mobilization of the people, thereby stimulating awareness on the part of a large portion of the population of the region;*
- *the level of organization and awareness between rural farmers and urban workers which was achieved;*
- *the creation of a network of consultative committees;*
- *the presence of schools in all communities and townships and of teachers in all villages;*
- *post-literacy alternatives based on reality and the actual practice of the subjects the people have been taught;*
- *the linking of education to regional development projects;*
- *the choice for neo-literates wishing to continue their education between a rural school or a traditional school.*

CONCLUSION

Rio San Juan has gone from being a backward geographical area considered as a source of exploitation and rural emigration to being an area of development with a future of its own. In this radical turnabout, literacy and education were the basic ingredients of its success, which was built upon the determination and involvement of the community.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Juán B. Arrien to the cause of Literacy. During his career, Dr Arrien has been Rector of the Central American University in Managua, including a period as president of the Federation of Central American Universities and a member of the executive council of the Union of Latin American Universities. For the last ten years he has been in charge of planning at the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education. He is at present acting as a consultant to the Ministry of Education as well as Secretary to the Nicaraguan Commission for Co-operation with Unesco.

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